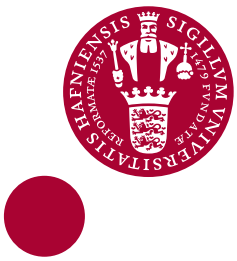

Planetary perspectives

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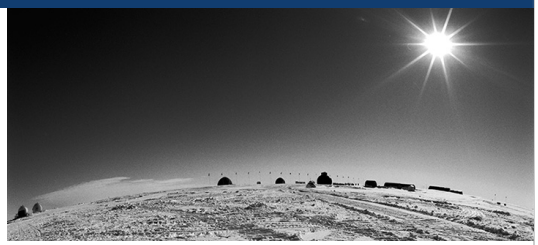


CLIMATE CHANGE

Planetary Perspectives

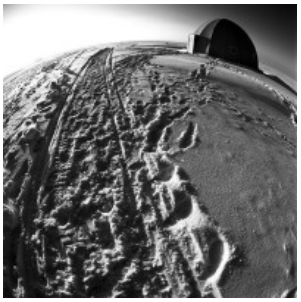
Martin Skrydstrup

A Note on the Optical Sub-Consciousness in Ethnographic Fieldwork

Since the heyday of ethnographic fieldwork in the opening decade of the 20th century, anthropologists have brought cameras to their respective field sites. Today, we have an entire subdiscipline laboring on the pros and cons of bringing such a device to the field. The debates in visual anthropology have often revolved around if a camera is capable of capturing and conveying the invisibility of human experiences in ways that monographs are not. This question often boils down to abstract debates on the troubled spaces between observer and observed and between representation and reality. Or more aesthetic debates about the nature and culture of human perception and the merits of different representational techniques, such as reportage, documentary, *cinéma vérité*, montage, holography and the like, and what they might have to offer anthropological understanding (eg, Suhr and Willerslev 2012). British anthropologist and art historian Christopher Pinney has historized these debates and concludes that contemporary anthropology is more skeptically inclined towards photography than ever before. In his view, anthropology has moved away from photography, but continues to define itself through and against the "nature of photography" (Pinney, 2011:154). However, given this rich body of academic work on photography and anthropology, we seem to know less about the visual aspirations of the communities anthropologists study and effective visual experiments in anthropology with such aspirations seem perhaps few and far between. In the following, I offer some notes on such an experiment, which quite literally took its own course from what I would call my optical sub-conscious.

Scientist Daiana Leuenberger, University of Bern, Switzerland, in the CFA-lab (Continuous Flow Analysis) in the science trench at 3AM. The CFA lab was the only space with normal room temperature outside the Main Dome. Daiana is deciphering aerosol concentrations (e.g. ash particles from volcanic eruptions) in the ice core, projecting temporal curves for the Northern hemisphere, which have never been achieved with this degree of resolution before. In this field season of 2010, Daiana held the record among the scientists of being embedded for almost 90 days. Photo courtesy Martin Skrydstrup

In the summer of 2010, I was embedded as an ethnographer, cook and ice core logger in the NEEM camp (North Greenland EEMian Ice Drilling) on the Arctic ice sheet. NEEM is a trans-national ice core research project aimed at retrieving ice from the so-called *Eemian*; a climatic period 115–130,000 years ago, which science holds to be 5 degrees C warmer than the present and thus serving as an evidentiary terrain for projections of global warming. Like many anthropologists before me, I brought a camera to my field site. However, I was well aware that the NEEM camp was one of the most photographed places on Earth, both by the inhabitants themselves and by professional broadcast journalists working exclusively with DSLRs, producing a highly saturated medialized vision of the camp. Insisting that the anthropological gaze was distinct and different from the scientists' and the journalists', I brought a medium format analogue camera, which resulted in a body of black and white images that were distinctively different from the steady stream of color images produced by the scientists themselves and broadcast media).



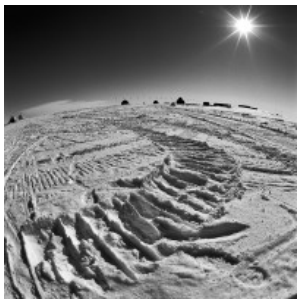
Tracks from the Pisten Bully; a vehicle considered the exclusive domain of the most skilled technician in camp. Photo courtesy Martin Skrydstrup

Lunch inside the Main Dome, where Dorthe Dahl-Jensen announces that the drillers are approaching bedrock. Here I used an extreme wide-angle to show the wood and the roundness of the Main Dome to emphasize domesticity giving visual voice to an emerging academic argument. Photo courtesy Martin Skrydstrup

A couple of months after my exit from the Greenlandic ice sheet, the coordinator of the Centre for Ice and Climate (CIC) at the University of Copenhagen, which managed the NEEM project, called me and said that they wanted to use one of my photographs as the annual NEEM Christmas card to go around the world and represent their project (Picture 1). It did not surprise me that they had chosen an image of the Main Dome in camp with a fogbow arc mimicking the shape of the dome. Fogbows are the Arctic's analogue of rainbows, where incoming light interacts with very small water droplets or mist. This was an image of their house of science, their place of assembly and their parliament, where decisions were taken and announced. Architecturally, the design was unique compared to Antarctica. The fogbow rendered an aura of revelation over their daring enterprise; some would even say a hemispheric glorification of science bordering on the religious. Below the image they had put a minimalistic text:

"NEEM 77.45 N 51.06 W" with their brand in one corner and their website in the opposite one. Significantly, the reference to place was not written in letters, but in longitudes and latitudes, ie numerical correspondence with the outmost precision. Later, I was offered to publish a portfolio of my images as a virtual gallery on the CIC homepage, which I happily accepted. This project is entitled *A Cold Northern Light: On Capturing and Conveying Cosmo-science with a Camera*. The series published here follows the chronological itinerary of my fieldwork, from entry to the Arctic landscape and the camp and exit in the Hercules.

To establish most of these images, I often chose to work with an extreme wide-angle lens, which bended the horizon and made interiors appear rounder and more domesticated. Writing up my field notes, I came to realize that the use of this lens coincided with lengthy elaborations on the planetary visions, scales and perspectives, which the scientists employed in their laboratories and the domesticity they created in the Main Dome. Without me being fully conscious of this, I had somehow used the camera to give visual form to an emerging argument about the creation of home and domesticity on the ice sheet and the hemispheric perspectives of the inhabitants there. In retrospective, it seems to me that anthropologists, rather than being suspicious towards the burden and limitations of their camera as a recording device of experience and sociality, should be more open towards its capability to anticipate their own thinking, conveying other perspectives and ultimately ending up making a visual representation of the community being studied.



The Main Street of NEEM. Here I have used an extreme wide-angle lens to convey the isolation and planetary scale of the camp. Photo courtesy Martin Skrydstrup

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